

19b

Aṭṭhi,puñja Sutta

The Discourse on the Pile of Bones | It 24
Theme: Truly seeing the noble truths awakens us
Translated by Piya Tan ©2020

1 Summary and significance

1.1 SUMMARY

1.1.1 The Aṭṭhi,puñja Sutta (It 24) is, like **the (Anamatagga) Puggala Sutta** (S 15.10), SD 57.19a, a reflection on samsara or the endless cyclic life that we all go through, living and dying, over and over again. The Sutta has only 2 parts:

- (1) The thesis: **the parable of bone-mountain**, spatially illustrating the time that we have spent “roaming and wandering on” in samsara; and
- (2) **the closing verses**, elaborating on the thesis, by teaching us about the world of formations and how we must work to free ourself from it by understanding the 4 noble truths.¹

The closing verses [§§4-7] recur in **the (Anamatagga) Puggala Sutta** (S 15.10), SD 57.19a.²

1.1.2 The (Anamatagga) Puggala Sutta (**S 15.10**) **parable** is that of the mountain of bones [1.1.1(1)]; its thesis is that samsara is “without a knowable beginning.” Then, it (S 15.10) asks, “What is the reason for this,” and answers by repeating the thesis as a refrain. [SD 57.19a].

1.2 COMPARISON: It 24 and S 15.10

Both **the Aṭṭhi,puñja Sutta** (It 24) and **the (Anamatagga) Puggala Sutta** (S 15.10) are reflections on the immeasurably long cycle of samsara, through which we have been going through countless rebirths and redeaths. Both suttas record the Buddha as declaring that if we are to pile up all our skeletal remains of all our individual lives for a world cycle (*kappa*), it would be as huge and high as Mount Vepulla.

The significance of this is that we have been suffering in countless ways and in such severe intensity that we should be disgusted (*nibbindati*) about it, and would at once wish to be free from samsara. This is, in fact, the purpose of the Buddha’s teaching: awakening frees us from samsara.

On account of **It 24** being a shorter text, and **S 15.10** the longer one, and both dealing with the same overlapping teaching on samsara, the former is probably the earlier text. Traditionally, it is attributed to the laywoman disciple, **Khujj’uttarā**,³ the hunchback maid to Samāvātī, one of king Udena’s chief queens.⁴

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¹ See SD 57.19a (1.2.3).

² For comy on these closing verses, see SD 57.19a (1.2.3).

³ On Khujj’uttarā, see SD 57.26 (2.2).

⁴ On the story of queen Sāmāvātī and Khujj’uttarā, see DhA 2.1/1:208-231. On Khujj’uttarā: AA 1:418-445; ItA 1:29-34.

Aṭṭhi,puñja Sutta

The Discourse on the Pile of Bones

It 24

1 This was indeed spoken by the Blessed One, heard by me spoken by the Arhat.⁵

THE THESIS

2 ⁶Of one person,⁷ bhikshus, roaming and wandering on, there would be the huge skeletal remains,⁸ heap of bones, pile of bones, just like this Mount Vepulla,⁹ if there were someone to collect them and the collection were not to perish.

3 The Blessed One said this matter [meaning]¹⁰; therein [of that matter] he says this:¹¹

<p>4 <i>Ekass'ekena kappena puggalass'aṭṭhi,sañcayo</i>¹² <i>siyā pabbata,samo rāsi iti vuttam mahēsino</i></p>	<p>“The heap of bones of one person alone, with the passing of a single aeon, would form a heap a mountain high: so said the great sage.¹³</p>	<p><i>ba</i></p>
<p>5 <i>So kho panāyam akkhāto vepullo pabbato mahā uttaro gijjha,kūṭassa magadhānam giri-b,bajo</i></p>	<p>This is said to be as huge as Mount Vepulla is huge, on the north of Vulture Peak, in Magadha's hilly range [Giribbaja].¹⁴</p>	

⁵ *Vuttam h'etam bhagavata, vuttam arahatā'ti me sutam*. This is said to be spoken by the laywoman **Khujj'uttarā**. See SD 57.26 (1.2.2.3); SD 16.14 (1).

⁶ *Ce eka,puggalassa bhikkhave kappam sandhāvato saṃsarato siyā evam mahā aṭṭhi,kaṅkhalo* aṭṭhi,puñjo aṭṭhi,rāsi yathā'yaṃ vepullo pabbato, sace saṃhārako assa, sambhatañ ca na vinasseyyātu. Aṭṭhi,kaṅkhalo*, “skeleton” (MA 3:42,26 ad M 1:364,14; ItA 1:83,36+84,3 ad It 17,8). See SD 57.19a (1.1.2.1).

⁷ Comys discuss “person” (*puggala*) in some detail, incl the 2 languages (*sammuti* and *param'attha*): ItA 1:82,4-83,33; MA 1:137,20-139,24; AA 1:94,19-97,14. Cf DA 2:382,20-383,29; SA 2:391,18-392,18 types; KvuA 34,13-36,22 = JPTS 1889:33 f; Nett 903/1:176.

⁸ “A great collection of bones,” *mahā aṭṭhi,kaṅkhalo*. Both *aṭṭhi* and *kaṅkala* (or *kaṅkāla*) mean “a skeleton”; but *aṭṭhi* means “bone.” As at **(Anamatagga) Puggala S** (S 15.10,4), SD 57.19a. Although CPD, DP, PED say that *aṭṭhi,-kaṅkala* means “skeleton,” the context here is clear as noted by Comy, which states that this and the 2 that follow—*aṭṭhi,puñjo* and *aṭṭhi,rāsi*—are all synonyms for *rāsi*,”heap” (SA 2:158,21-26). Hence, it refers to the total skeletal remains of a single person rather than that of a single person.

⁹ On Mount Vepulla, see SD 57.19a (2.2).

¹⁰ *Attha* is polysemic: we can take “matter” as referring to the preceding, and “meaning” as given in the foll.

¹¹ *Etam attham bhagavā avoca, tatth'etam iti vuccati*. This may be seen thus: the former phrase refers to the teaching in meaning (*attha*) (true reality), reflecting the 1st 2 noble truths; the latter is its purpose (*attha*). The set of verses below recur in **(Anamatagga) Puggala S** (S 15.10,8-11), where see SD 57.19a (1.2.3) for comy.

¹² Both S+It MSS so, except It:Be *-sañjayo*.

¹³ On this verse, see SD 57.19a (1.2.3.1).

¹⁴ *Giri-b,baja* (*-vaja*) means a place enclosed by hills (like a cow-pen, *vaja*) (Tha 1097; ThaA 3:152,13; J 3:479,4 f). On Rājagaha being called so: V 1:43,16* (VA 976,30); M 1:31,28 (MA 1:151,10 f); S 2:185,21* (SA 2159,2 f); UA 265,-6. On this verse, see SD 57.19a (1.2.3.2).

- 6 *Yato ariya,saccāni
samma-p,paññāya passati
dukkhaṃ dukkha,samuppādaṃ
dukkhassa ca atikkamaṃ
ariy'aṭṭh'aṅgikaṃ maggaṃ¹⁶
dukkhūpasama,gaminari* But when one sees the noble truths¹⁵
with right wisdom so: *ba*
suffering, the arising of suffering,
the overcoming of suffering, and
the noble eightfold path
that leads to the stilling of suffering.¹⁷
- 7 *sa,satta-k,khattuṃ paramaṃ¹⁸
sandhāvitvāna puggalo
dukkhass'antar,karo
sabba,samyojana-k,khayāti* Then, that person, having wandered on *ba*
seven times at the most,
makes an end to suffering
by destroying all the fetters.”¹⁹
- 8 This matter [meaning] too was spoken by the Blessed One. Thus I have heard.²⁰

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¹⁵ This whole verse almost identical to Dh 190b-191d.

¹⁶ S:Be *ariyaṃ c'aṭṭh'aṅgikaṃ maggaṃ*; S:Be+Se It:Be+Ce+Se *ariyañ c'aṭṭha'ṅgikaṃ maggaṃ*; S:Ee *ariy'aṭṭh'aṅgikaṃ maggaṃ*; It:Ee *Ee ariyaṃ aṭṭh'aṅgikaṃ maggaṃ*.

¹⁷ On this verse, see SD 57.19a (1.2.3.3).

¹⁸ S:Be+Ee+Se *sa satta-k,khattuṃ paramaṃ*; S:Ce *na satta-k,khattu,paramaṃ* (wr); S:Be It:Be *sa satta-k,khattuṃ paramaṃ*; It:Ce *satta-k,khattuṃ paramaṃ*; It:Ee *sa,satta-k,khattuṃ paramaṃ*.

¹⁹ See SD 57.19a (1.2.3.4).

²⁰ *Ayam pi attho vutto bhagavatā. Iti me sutan ti.*